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ABSTRACT

Characteristics of graduate teaching were identified, based on interviews with 18 graduate faculty members at the University of North Dakota (UND). Respondents identified the following essential characteristics of graduate education: the faculty member's knowledge of the subject, objectives of graduate-level programs, the teacher's role, graduate course design, the relationship between teacher and student, the evaluation of graduate students, and the roles of theses and dissertations. In contrast to undergraduate students, graduate students are already grounded in the basics and are striving for excellence in a focused area. Graduate study becomes a highly specialized education, and the graduate school is a new environment. The graduate professor's goal is to help each student gain a mastery of a field, developing students who are independent researchers and practitioners in the field. In summary, the graduate degree is different, and therefore, the demands, expectations, and approaches are different, changing the teacher's role, objectives, course design, and relationship with students at the graduate level. (SW)

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INSTRUCTIONAL DEVELOPMENT REPORT

A Look at Graduate Teaching at UND: Faculty Perspectives

Carol R. Jacobson

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A Look at Graduate Teaching at UND:
Faculty Perspectives

Much has been written about elementary, secondary and undergraduate teaching, but the area of graduate teaching has been less well considered in the literature. Certainly active instruction does not stop at the undergraduate level, but much can be said specifically about graduate level education. There has been an interest at UND in graduate instruction, as it might differ from undergraduate instruction. Faculty have speculated whether graduate level teaching requires approaches and skills that undergraduate does not, and whether the successful undergraduate teacher will also be a successful graduate teacher, and vice versa. With these questions in mind a number of UND graduate faculty members were interviewed in hopes of identifying distinguishable characteristics of graduate teaching.

Eighteen members of the UND faculty were interviewed, representing a range of graduate programs: Alice Clark, Vice President for Academic Affairs; Michael Gregory, Mathematics; Steven Harlow, Special Education; Carla Hess, Communication Disorders; Joe Hootman, Electrical Engineering; A. William Johnson, Dean of the Graduate School; Robert King, Elementary Education and English; Ralph Kolstoe, Psychology; Fred Lawrence, Business & Public Administration; Robert Lewis, English; Richard Ludtke, Sociology; Jacquelyn McElroy-Edwards, Visual Arts; Robert Nordlie, Biochemistry; Russell Peterson, Center for Teaching and Learning; Stephen Rendahl, Speech and Journalism; William Sheridan, Biology; Elliot Shubert, Biology; and Playford Thorson, History. As might be expected each person holds unique as well as common perspectives on graduate level teaching. Similarities and differences among our fields of graduate study, their requirements and goals for students, contribute to the character of graduate education at a university such as ours.

I. Common Themes

The essential characteristics of graduate education, identified by those whom we interviewed, seem to fall into a number of categories: the faculty member's knowledge of the subject, objectives of graduate level programs, the role of the teacher, design of graduate courses, the relationship between teacher and student, the evaluation of graduate students, and the role of theses and dissertations. About each of these aspects of graduate level teaching common themes emerged.

Knowledge of Subject

Before a professor can teach, he or she must know the subject. Though this might be considered a truism of college teaching, those whom we interviewed wanted to emphasize this characteristic of graduate level teaching. A special knowledge of subject is required. A. William Johnson suggests that "a graduate professor must bring students to the forefront of knowledge." That knowledge is a "dynamic" knowledge, which is the most up-to-date information in the field, discovered only through research and reading. Graduate profesors necessarily possess this dynamic knowledge and require it of their students.

In many fields, those students who enter graduate school already are practicing professionals. This presents a special challenge to the faculty member's knowledge of their subject. Robert King points out that "graduate teachers should be capable of detailed analysis of problems and situations, helping students develop a stronger view of their professional work." "The graduate teacher," he adds, "needs to be able to communicate effectively and should practice the profession by writing, researching, and doing creative work." In order for graduate professors to remain at the forefront of dynamic knowledge they must be actively pursuing their discipline or professional field, doing the work of a scholar or creative artist.

When students begin graduate study they are saying something about their commitment to a discipline or professional field. In turn they look for a serious commitment from their professors. Alice Clark believes that "graduate professors have an obligation to keep current and sharp . . . Research, creative activity, and scholarship are essential to this obligation."

Objectives of Graduate Instruction

The objectives of graduate teaching differ from those of undergraduate education, as our faculty have suggested. Graduate education's purpose is to train students to be experts in their fields. Students strive to determine their real potential, going beyond what has already been mastered. Jacquelyn McElroy-Edwards believes that "you can expect a lot from graduate students--personal development and personal motivation." The graduate professor can focus on helping the students move beyond the point of their previous education. Masters or doctoral students should be devoted to a mastery of their field; therefore, the graduate professor can place on them the demands of independent learning. According to Russell Peterson "the responsibility is placed on students because it is they who have so much at stake: money, time, and effort."

Richard Ludtke's objective in graduate education is "to teach graduate students to become competent and employable as sociologists, well grounded in the field of sociology, or skilled enough to pursue a Ph.D." Robert Lewis points out, that in English "the literature is so broad that to be well read is the merit of few, so the main goal is to have the tools to read it; thus the objective for graduate students is to become a professional who is an independent researcher who studies, reads, and writes better, capable of teaching and publishing." Ralph Kolstoe believes that his objective is generally

the same on all levels: "to teach students a concept of self renewal, building tools to continue scholarly development."

Robert Nordlie describes his objective in the classoom on the graduate level as "getting students started in their own research." "From there," he adds, "the responsibility is theirs, developing themselves into independent researchers, setting up experiments, and asking and answering their own questions." A graduate professor, according to our faculty, is concerned with the stimulation of learning, helping students develop themselves into competent scholars and professionals within their own fields.

Graduate students are viewed as colleagues in the making, not yet peers but progressing toward that status. Graduate students are taken seriously by professors because, as Jackie McElroy-Edwards points out, "they generally work very hard, knowing that graduate school is serious." Even in a mixed course of both graduates and undergraduates, the graduates are treated differently, usually required to do more work. Playford Thorson believes that a professor should "expect a higher level of intelligence from graduate students, extra time per course, lots of reading, plenty of analysis and a thesis or dissertation that breaks new ground."

The Professor's Role

All of those interviewed agreed that their role as graduate teacher differs from that at the undergraduate level. With graduate students a teacher assumes that students already have a strong interest in the subject matter and have developed the basic tools needed to become competent in the discipline or field. At the graduate level, A. W. Johnson points out, the teacher becomes a "professional role model, making students aware of what it's like to be involved in the discipline." According to L. Elliot Shubert "the professor sets an example of dedication and interest, guiding students in becoming future colleagues."

Graduate education is an intensifying pursuit in which a student focuses on a specific area and masters it, whereas undergraduate education is a broader undertaking, exposing the student to as much of the world of knowledge as possible. William Sheridan believes that a graduate professor's role is to help students become "independent scholars." He adds that graduate education should be "a continuation of undergraduate development and a deepening of a focused specialization." There is no need for a professor on a graduate level to take an authoritative role; she or he should be seen as a reliable source, helping students learn, allowing them to make accomplishments of their own.

University professors also serve to screen and decide who should serve the society as a teacher or engineer or artist. Richard Ludtke describes the graduate teacher as "a quality controller who judges and guides the students, certifying students' entry into a profession." This makes the role of graduate teacher, serving as professional model of quality, dedication, and interest, an especially important one.

Course Design

The design of courses seems much less structured at the graduate level. Students often have an influence on the course syllabus and the curriculum being taught in the department. Stephen Rendahl suggests that "graduate classes should emphasize choice," exposing the students to a variety of areas, giving a feel for the material but then expecting that students will choose where to focus their attention. This view is supported by Steven Harlow who notes that "graduates usually come in with a set of concerns and the class is readjusted for them, perhaps changing the topic from day to day."

Dean Johnson points out the different types of classes offered in the UND Graduate School, a difference that adds flexibility, making graduate study tailor-made for all students, meeting their specific needs and interests.

The graduate program allows students to work independently with a professor on topics of their choice either as Directed Readings--the professor guiding a student through literature, finding out what is known, or Directed Study--the professor guiding a student through research, finding out what isn't known. A third course type, Special Topics, gives a department limitless flexibility to offer courses when the students and the department have a special interest in the subject.

Graduate classes are generally conducted as seminars and tend to be smaller than undergraduate classes, allowing for more freedom in discussion and more one-to-one interaction. Seminars work well in graduate education because graduate students have the basic tools that allow for a discussion and more active participation with the faculty member. Most teachers interviewed agree that UND graduate students prepare themselves for class, taking responsibility for the material being covered, then adding to it.

Sometimes a break from dependency on the instructor does not happen until after the student has had some experience in graduate study. Robert Nordlie observes that, "at first students are told to do this and to do that in a graduate program, but later on they go out on their own, becoming independent learners." Fred Lawrence suggests that graduate students "should be given an experience as close to reality as possible, giving them independence, letting them choose their own methods." Course design in graduate school should allow for independent development and the graduate teacher should encourage and promote a maturity within the classroom. Russell Peterson offers that "the ideal graduate teacher, by the nature of his position, brings a different experience to the classroom, recognizing that teaching is not just a transmission of information, but enabling the student to experience depth through reading, research and writing."

Relationship of Teacher and Student

Whether it should be or not, the relationship between the professor and student at the graduate level is quite different than at the undergraduate level. The graduate student usually has daily contact and interaction with his or her teachers. A. W. Johnson states that "the graduate students are encouraged to be involved, continually rubbing shoulders with faculty, interacting both professionally and personally." Elliot Shubert believes "that in a graduate program professors get to know students more easily because the atmosphere is relaxed, with more give and take in the classroom." Bill Sheridan views the relationship between professor and student as an "apprenticeship--the graduate student training to become a professional in his field, a future colleague or associate, developed through a close relationship with the professor." Rich Ludtke adds that "graduate students are being socialized to peer status, the professor serving as a research and teaching model."

Because of the basic character of graduate education--knowledge, roles, objectives, courses, evaluations, research, and relationships--the entire atmosphere within a department tends to be distinct for graduate students. Graduate students can experience a sense of community within their own department, usually because they get themselves involved in some way, somtimes working as teaching or research assistants, perhaps serving on a committee or attending departmental meetings. All of these involvements give the graduate student regular contact with members of the faculty, thus allowing students to get to know the faculty well and feel a part of them. Robert Nordlie describes a healthy graduate atmosphere as "one of proper attitude--one of encouragement, reward, concern for students, importance, and availability." Russell Peterson suggests that graduate students should be given offices around the department allowing them to "have continual daily contact, forming special friendships on a personal and professional

basis." Stephen Rendahl calls this "a common turf where barriers between students and teachers can be broken down." Whatever it is called it seems that successful graduate teaching requires a special relationship for the faculty member and the department itself with the student.

Evaluating Graduate Students

Because graduate classes allow considerable interaction with graduate students, evaluating students is possible through class discussion, oral presentations, and research or creative work. Few "tests" are given to graduate students at UND, if our sample of instructors is representative of the graduate faculty. If a test is given, it inevitably will be an essay test. Russell Peterson emphasizes that "the professor should know what the students know through dialogue and interaction." He may require a paper but adds that, "a professor should be continually examining his students as he works with them each day."

Our faculty members expect the work of graduate students to be professional, even publishable, a top quality effort in everything. Playford Thorson expects his graduates, when writing research papers, to "use proper form, proper layout, footnotes and documentation, the use of primary research material which displays a knowledge of the subject and excellent writing skills." When Elliot Shubert assigns a project or a paper he wants to know "what are the student's concepts, ideas and approaches?" Graduate education goes beyond the factual, instead professors are interested in creativity and the development of the graduate student's ideas.

Thesis and Dissertation

The Thesis or Dissertation is possibly the most distinctive aspect of graduate teaching. Here an instructor has the opportunity to work individually with students who have designed their own research projects, leading and guiding them to total independence as scholars or artists. This gives the student a perfect chance

to break new ground, discover the unknown, and to produce a new design or work of art with the assistance of an experienced person in the field. This is sort of a final test in graduate education, a chance for the student to show all of his learned skills and reveal his development as an independent professional. It also provides for the professor a way of analyzing and evaluating the student's competence as a professional in that field.

Since all graduate programs require doing some type of final project a major concern of a graduate teacher is the availability of adequate research and studio facilities, providing for the student classical and current literature and modern equipment and supplies. According to Robert Nordlie "a graduate program needs certain basics to even function: a minimal nucleus of students and faculty; a good library with adequate facilities; a building that provides adequate study, teaching, and lab facilities; and a good supply of money for aid to students' supplies." These basics, echoed by many of the teachers interviewed, are an essential ingredient in successful graduate teaching.

Graduate Teaching Contrasted to Undergraduate Education

Graduate level teaching is interesting in and of itself, yet at a university where most faculty members teach both graduate and undergraduate students a contrast between them seems useful. At the undergraduate level the teacher works hard to get students interested in the subject matter, enlightening them with information, but on the graduate level students already have a commitment to the subject. Robert Nordlie believes the role of the graduate teacher is "to promote, motivate and expedite," and the role of the undergraduate teacher is "to be a classroom teacher, increasing students' awareness and sophistication, broadening students' background." Michael Gregory observes that an "undergraduate teacher is like a spoon feeder, giving students the information step by step; but a graduate teacher is more like a guide, because students already know the basic steps." When Joe Hootman gives a problem in class, "the tools

are defined for undergraduates and they are told which ones are best to use for that problem, but on the graduate level the students need to decide for themselves which tools to use in solving the problem." On the undergraduate level, Steven Harlow sees the professor's role "as a facilitator, taking a responsibility for the student." "But hopefully," he continues, "the teacher can withdraw from the authoritative role and move on to graduate level teaching [even with undergraduates], which is more of a pure state where students are completely dedicated."

Harlow's objective at the undergraduate level is to "get students to become independent learners and problem solvers by the end of their senior year, then they can hopefully see themselves as professionals." If this happens, he adds, "a professor can expect independence right away on the graduate level and aim for increasing students' professional options, tools and ideas." According to Jacquelyn McElroy-Edwards, her objective for undergraduates, especially during their freshman and sophomore years is "to teach technology, mechanics and process, grounding them in the basics, then in their junior and senior years begin to develop their own independent expression and drive, so by the time they are graduate students they have shed the influence of previous professors and have made their own personal statement in their work, recognizing that what they are doing is completely their own."

Undergraduate courses are typically large and designed to provide a lot of information through lectures and discussions. Students are directed within each class, especially at the beginning of their undergraduate studies, relying on the instructor for information and guidance. Steven Harlow states that "undergraduates need to be continually reminded of assignments and due dates, and the nature of expectations, whereas with graduate students a professor can assume they'll have it done, and voluntarily share experiences in class, developing discussion throughout the class period."

The preparation made for graduate teaching differs from undergraduate teaching. Alice Clark points out that in graduate education "the preparation is more intense and complex, more focused, the teacher working to challenge students' thinking, raising questions, developing independence in students." Michael Gregory observes that "the preparation for an undergraduate course is more routine because generally the same courses are taught each year; whereas in a graduate course you must spend more time and be meticulously prepared, because the material isn't as familiar, since courses aren't offered as frequently." The preparation is different because the course work being covered is different. According to Fred Lawrence "the size and volume of the work is different for graduates; even though graduate classes in Management cover the same subject areas as undergraduates, they are more rigorous, more indepth and faster." Robert King emphasizes this point, believing that "a graduate teacher demands greater detail from students because the course work is greater and more time is devoted to the theoretical framework of a subject."

Joe Hootman defined Electrical Engineering as a "professional school, usually not even dealing with undergraduates until they are at least sophomores." He noted that he "doesn't see a big difference between upper level undergraduates and graduates; but graduate school is a step above, thus, teachers expect graduates to know more and to do more, grading them differently within mixed courses, making them find solutions to problems, requiring them to learn more tools and abstract concepts." Michael Gregory believes that there is more flexibility within course work on the undergraduate level in his field. He states that "because the course is longer and more intense you have more time to go off and talk about the history of the subject, giving interesting sidelines that motivate students; but on the graduate level you must move quickly to cover all the material, not allowing as much time to go off the subject." Russell Peterson views his field of Education at quite a different pace. He believes that "graduate students

are used to going fast at the undergraduate level, but at the graduate level the momentum changes, dropping to a slower pace, concerned with total mastery."

Undergraduates are evaluated for the most part by their performances on written exams. Robert Nordlie notes that undergraduate students have a "stereotyped mentality, which isn't meant in a negative way, but they have been conditioned to attend class and take notes, then take a test and get a grade." Peterson believes that "an undergraduate is conditioned to come to class and have the instructor do the thinking for him." "Undergraduate teachers," he adds, "are trapped into covering a certain amount of material because of examinations, but on the graduate level there shouldn't be tests because teachers work with students continually." Gregory observes again that "the evaluation for undergraduates is done through very detailed in-class tests, but graduate evaluation is on written work outside of class or an oral examination."

Alice Clark desribes the relationship between undergraduates and professors as a "polar relationship" which is altered on the graduate level when professors view the students as future peers who have important ideas and are worthy of the department's confidence and trust, capable of doing quality research or creative work and competent to teach introductory courses. Professors get to know graduate students better because classes are smaller, allowing for more contact. Also graduates are given more opportunities to become involved with the professors within the department, either as graduate assistants or tutors. A. W. Johnson sums up by suggesting that undergraduates are "more like drop-ins within the department, not getting very involved, while graduate students often take up residence in the libraries, labs, and studies of graduate faculty."

I. Discordances

In our interviews opposing views were not expressed as often as we had expected. Yet differences in philosophy, approach, and emphasis did emerge. The importance of remaining current in ones field was emphasized by a number

of professors. University professors are expected to be productive scholars and artists, capable of training graduate students to do their own research or creative work. William Sheridan believes that "professors who are deeply committed to excellence--excellence in research and teaching--are the good teachers. Research keeps the professor enthusiastic and up-to-date in his field, enhancing his ability to teach, but a word of warning was mentioned by a few professors regarding personal research. According to Elliot Shubert "teaching should be give and take, so if it's strictly on the professor's research the teaching sometimes becomes very limited and narrow."

Research helps to deepen the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter, but Robert King points out a danger in going too deep and not being able to relate to the students at their level. "A teacher," according to King, "needs to be at the interface between the knowledge and the students, making a connection between the discipline and the students, sometimes making the connection by personality and not by subject matter." "If a professor goes too deep," he adds, "he won't get back to the initial contact that he first had with students."

Clearest differences of opinion had to do with course objectives and course design. Basically our faculty agreed that a graduate professor's depth of knowledge, role as a teacher, and relationship with students should not differ across fields of study on the graduate level. Each field, though, has its own goals for students, some areas comparably alike and some quite different in their outcomes and purposes. William Sheridan emphasized the differences, offering that "the sciences and arts are training scholars, the Ph.D. and MA being research degrees where the student is working with new knowledge, developing creative efforts and insights, but the professional fields, such as law, medicine, nursing, etc., are different because they are training students to become proficient in a specific skill, acquiring certain techniques for that profession."

Carla Hess points out a similar difference within her own field. Her students at UND are being "qualified to perform competencies as clinicians specifically in this field," at the Master's level. At other institutions graduate programs prepare Ph.D. level clinician directors. Consequently, at UND the objectives and design of graduate education, including the knowledge and professional activities of the faculty, will be very different than at a doctorate level department.

Robert King believes it's very important for graduate students in his field of Elementary Education to have formal classroom training "to help students become more professional, presenting opportunities to work on teaching and try out new things." Steven Harlow believes that his graduate students in Special Education should develop teaching skills as well, and requires a practicum experience, "which helps students relate strategies to actual classroom experience, allowing them to test their learning and then share these experiences in graduate seminars." These objectives make graduate education and graduate teaching very different in Elementary Education and Special Education than in Sheridan's Biology department, or even Hess's Communication Disorders department.

William Sheridan believes it's appropriate for Biology graduate students to have some teaching experience but "the experience shouldn't be as a formal class; instead it should be an observation of good teaching techniques from an effective teacher in the department." He feels it's unnecessary for his students to take a class in teaching techniques, but King stresses the importance of education classes that "get into theory, helping teachers better understand and confront classroom problems." In Communication Disorders Carla Hess gives students a clinician teaching experience. She says that this is a "one-on-one teaching experience between patient and student with the teacher acting as supervisor."

Because the objectives for each field differ, it's inevitable that differences will show up in course design. Most professors agreed that classes are smaller,

more focused and readily invite participation and discussion from graduate students. Graduate course design usually steers away from lecture, but Carla Hess still finds a need on the graduate level for lecturing. She adds that "the program is very tight, which makes lecture necessary, but still leaves room for labs, demonstrations and some seminars." Also in Biochemistry Robert Nordlie usually begins with lecture but then lets students get involved, "presenting relative articles to the class, applying them to what they've learned." His courses are designed to "give students a good background, preparing them to do their own original research."

Steven Harlow usually assigns a textbook for his graduate courses but doesn't pace the reading. He also asks students to read different articles, stressing that "graduate students are working for certification, so they need to concentrate on specific problems in Special Education, dealt with in current literature." In Biology, Elliot Shubert doesn't use textbooks in his graduate courses but instead assigns current articles. He adds that each day "a particular topic is discussed, sometimes presented by one student and a paper is assigned." In the History department Playford Thorson doesn't assign textbooks to his graduate students either, but asks them to "read different interpretations and accounts, developing theses that deal with the 'why' question of history."

Jacquelyn McElroy-Edwards and Robert Nordlie are specifically concerned with adequate facilities in order for their graduate teaching to be successful. The best working conditions for a graduate student in Visual Arts, according to McElroy-Edwards, requires that students have "a secure studio space of their own, providing a constant working area for them that is accommodating to their own style, and accessible to the necessary equipment." Nordlie emphasizes the importance in his field of Biochemistry for the department to have "adequate facilities, supplies and equipment, animals and chemicals." Without these extra supplies and facilities it would be hard for an artist or chemist

to do any creative or scholarly work. On the other hand, the adequate facilities needed for a graduate student in English or History are quite different. Robert Lewis notes that a good graduate education in English mainly requires "a top quality library, a good teacher, and a small amount of money for textbooks." Since History invites lots of research and reading Playford Thorson also emphasizes the need for a good library and adds that "graduate students must be very familiar with the sources and materials available in the library."

The sum of all this emphasizes quite clearly that there are important distinctions between graduate and undergraduate education, as well as a number of common themes and important differences in the approaches taken toward graduate teaching at UND. Graduate students are already grounded in the basics and are now striving for excellence in a focused area, graduate school becomes a highly specialized education, training serious and dedicated students who want to go beyond what they have already learned. Graduate school is a new environment that is distinguishably different from undergraduate education: a different experience, atmosphere, outcome, and degree. The graduate professor's goal is to help each student gain a mastery of a field, developing students who are independent researchers and practitioners in the field, fully professional and competent. Graduate teaching requires an up-to-date knowledge, and an example of dedication and commitment, just as does undergraduate teaching. Yet the degree is different, therefore the demands, expectations, and approach should be too, changing the teacher's role, objectives, course design, and relationship with students at the graduate level.

Author Biographical Note

Carol R. Jacobson is a Graduate Student in English and a Graduate Student Associate in the Office of Instructional Development at the University of North Dakota. She teaches freshman composition, as well, and intends to have a career as a college teacher.